

# Importance of conventional defence

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I WELCOME this opportunity to put the importance of conventional defence in perspective.

Regrettably, conventional capabilities receive less public attention than nuclear weapons. While nuclear programmes are essential and hopeful projects such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) are critical, we should bear in mind that conventional forces account for the vast majority of US and allied defence programmes.

In the USA, for example, strategic force programmes account for somewhat less than 15% of our defence budget, including SDI which amounts to less than 2%; the bulk of the remaining 85% is spent on general purpose force capabilities.

In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe — and herein lies the rub — conventional forces also predominate.

Why do we devote so much of our resources and defence dollars to conventional forces, and why is it vitally important that we continue to improve them?

First and foremost is the increasing threat posed by Soviet and Warsaw Pact general purpose forces and our need to deter Soviet aggression and intimidation. Should deterrence fail, we need robust conventional forces to defend against attack by these forces, consistent with NATO's strategy of flexible response.

The USSR is a large, continental power, with political ambitions backed by large ground and air forces.

These forces are deployed not only throughout the USSR and along its periphery, but also in Eastern Europe and Mongolia.

And, as we all know, Soviet forces are currently engaged in a vicious war against the people of Afghanistan.

Further, Moscow's navy is now capable of projecting power throughout the world.

A brief comparison of NATO and Warsaw Pact forces gives the best explanation of why we are concerned about the imbalance of conventional forces: counting reinforcements for a NATO-Pact conflict, the Pact has six million active duty personnel; NATO has 4.5 million.

In the Central Region of Europe, the Pact maintains 2:1 advantages in main battle tanks, combat aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, and combat helicopters, and it has a 3:1 advantage in artillery and infantry fighting vehicles.

In addition to the military capabilities of the Warsaw Pact, we must also pay attention to its military doctrine. This is the second area of major concern.

We believe Soviet doctrine and planning increasingly reflects a desire to defeat NATO



conventionally, forcing the burden to escalate onto NATO.

Since deterrence along the entire spectrum of conflict is our goal, we must not tempt our adversaries with hollow and outdated conventional forces.

Third, we do not want the Soviets to gain advantages over us stemming from the amount of resources allocated to military programmes.

For example, the Kremlin devotes 15-17% of its gross national product to defence, and it recently announced that the military budget will increase by 6% next year. While we believe published Pact figures on military spending are ludicrously low, the Soviets appear to be sending us a signal with the announcement of a 6% increase.

This comes at a time when the USA is devoting only about 6% of its GNP to defence, and most NATO countries are spending a lesser share of their GNP for defence and are not meeting NATO's goal of 3% real annual increase in defence spending.

Fourth, the Soviets are closing the technology gap. In the past, NATO has been able to rely on the West's superior technology to help offset the Pact's numerical superiority.

The Soviets have emphasised quantity but are increasingly improving the quality of their systems.

The Soviets have made a major effort to acquire Western military technology by all possible means, including theft.

Hundreds of their systems have benefited, or will benefit, from this technology, such as the look-down, shoot-down capability of the MiG-29/Fulcrum and the Su-27/Flanker which is based on the F/A-18's fire-control radar.

THIS is the first of a new series written by defence leaders especially for JDW.

There are several key steps the NATO Alliance should take to meet the threat posed by Soviet conventional superiority.

We should move in the direction of strengthening conventional capabilities so that we are less dependent upon having to use nuclear weapons in response to aggression.

The Conventional Defense Initiative is one such effort. It will exploit the technical leadership of the Alliance to correct critical deficiencies in our conventional capabilities.

Further, the new spirit of co-operation among NATO nations in the development and production of vitally needed new capabilities, reflected in the CDI and other initiatives, will allow more economical and prudent use of the combined resources of the Alliance.

At the same time, we must maintain strong nuclear capabilities, which continue to be a vital deterrent against any Soviet conventional attack.

A major step was taken in Iceland with President Reagan's far-reaching proposals on nuclear forces. Unfortunately, the Soviets wanted to hinge all agreements, even those concerning long-range INF systems, on our effectively killing the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Since Moscow has been actively pursuing strategic defence research for 25 years, and in the last 10 years has spent 15 times as much as the USA on such research, this wildly one-sided proposal had to be rejected.

While we hope that the Kremlin will soon remove this obstacle to agreement, we must maintain our robust deterrent forces.

We will, of course, continue our efforts to interest the Soviet Union in meaningful and verifiable reductions of conventional forces.

We seek a more stable balance at much lower levels. Through negotiations, we will strive to reduce asymmetries favouring the Pact in conventional forces; we should never codify imbalances giving the Warsaw Pact an advantage.

Needless to say, effective verification is a *sine qua non* for the USA in these negotiations. NATO's ability to respond to a Warsaw Pact build-up must not be compromised.

The future of Western security will rest as much on how we meet the challenge to conventional deterrence, as it will on how we manage our nuclear capabilities.

A renewed interest in, and appreciation of, the central role of conventional capabilities is essential for the continued strength of our alliance.